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Psalm 39

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Psalm 39— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "[Key to the charts](#)".

Specific features of Psalm 39

- Psalm 39 is clearly the follow-up to Psalm 38 in terms of the idea of hope (38:16 and 39:7) in a situation of distress. Its defining characteristic is the use of the numerical value of the keyword **הַבֵּל**, 'vanity' (**37**) to determine the number of words in the passage about the struggle of a mortal human being to come to grips with his feelings of gloom and doom (vs. 3-6). It is not surprising to find that the psalm is composed of **37** cola.
- The author also used the keyphrase, 'every mortal being is only a breath of wind', in vs. 6b and 12b to delimit the central core (vs. 7-12) and to determine the canto structure of the psalm. The core, Canto II, is additionally defined by the ingenious symmetric pattern of its **52** words (divided into **26 + 26**) and clearly marked in MT by *selah*.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: || Canticle boundary: |

- Van der Lugt: 2, 3-4 | 5-7 || 8-9, 10-11 | 12, 13, 14 (2 cantos and 4 Canticles, with 9 strophes, 15 verselines and 37 cola).
- Fokkelman: 2, 3-4 || 5-6b, 6c-7, 8-10 || 11-12, 13-14 (3 cantos, 7 strophes, 17 verselines and 37 cola, taking vs. 6c-7a as a bicolic verseline and v. 12 as a separate verseline).
- Labuschagne: 2, 3-4 | 5-6 || 7, 8-9 | 10-11, 12 || 13-14 (3 cantos, 4 Canticles, 8 strophes, 15 verselines and 37 cola, based on rhetorical and numerical considerations).
- For an overview of other divisions of the text, see Van der Lugt, CAS, Psalm 39, § 6.

Logotechnical analysis

- Column **a**: words before atnach; **b**: words after atnach.
- Column **c**: words describing feelings of gloom and doom.
- Column **d**: a fleeting mortal prays for deliverance.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמִנְצַח לִידוּתוֹן מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד : Heading, v. 1	4	4			
2	אָמַרְתִּי אֲשֶׁמְרָה דְּרָכִי 1	3	3		3	
	מִחֲטֹא בְּלִשְׁוֹנִי	2	2		2	
	אֲשֶׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחֲסוּבִי 2	3	3		3	
	בְּעַד רָשָׁע לִנְגְדִי:	3		3	3	
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 2	11	= 8	+ 3	= 11	+ 0

3	נֶאֱלַמְתִּי דוֹמִיָּה	3	2	2	2
	הַחֲשִׁיתִי מִטוֹבָה		2	2	2
	וּכְאֲבִי נֶעְכָּר:		2	2	2
	Total, v. 3		6	= 4 + 2	= 6 + 0
4	חֶסֶל־לִבִּי בְקֶרְבִּי	4	3	3	3
	בְּהִגִּי תִבְעַר־אִשִּׁי		3	3	3
	דְּבַרְתִּי בְלִשׁוֹנִי:		2	2	2
	Total, v. 4		8	= 6 + 2	= 8 + 0
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4		14	= 10 + 4	= 14 + 0
	Canticle I.1 Total, v. 2-4		25	= 18 + 7	= 25 + 0
5	הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה קִצִּי	5	3	3	3
	וּמִדַּת יָמֵי מַה־הִיא		4	4	4
	אֲרַעַח מַה־תָּדֹל אֲנִי:		4	4	4
	Total, v. 5		11	= 7 + 4	= 11 + 0
6*	הִנֵּה טַפְחוֹת נִתְּתָה יָמִי	6	4	4	4
	וְחִלְדֵּי כְּאֵין נִגְדָּה		3	3	3
	אֵד (כָּל)־הַכֵּל כָּל־אָדָם נֶצֶב סֵלָה:		5	5	5
	Total, v. 6		12	= 7 + 5	= 12 + 0
	Canticle I.2 Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6		23	= 14 + 9	= 23 + 0
	Total, v. 3-6		37	= 24 + 13	= 37 + 0
	Canto I Total, v. 2-6		48	= 32 + 16	= 48 + 0
7	אֵד־בְּצִלָּם יִתְחַלֵּךְ־אִישׁ	7	4	4	4
	אֵד־הַכֵּל יִהְיֶינָה		3	3	3
	יִצְבֹּר וְלֹא־יִדַּע מִי־אֶסְפָּם: (5 + 2 + 30 = 37)		5	5	5
	Strophe 4 Total, v. 7		12	= 7 + 5	= 0 + 12
8	Middle verseline: וְעַתָּה מַה־קִּוִּיתִי אֲדֹנָי	8	4	4	4
	תוֹחַלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא: (15 = 7 + 1 + 7)		3	3	3
	Meaningful centre Total, v. 8		7	= 4 + 3	= 0 + 7
9	מִכָּל־פִּשְׁעֵי הַצִּילָנִי	9	3	3	3
	חֶרֶפַת נָבֹל אֶל־תְּשִׁימֵנִי:		4	4	4
	Total, v. 9		7	= 3 + 4	= 0 + 7
	Strophe 5 Total, v. 8-9		14	= 7 + 7	= 0 + 14
	Canticle II.1 Total, v. 7-9		26	= 14 + 12	= 0 + 26
10	נֶאֱלַמְתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח־פִּי	10	4	4	4
	כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 10		7	= 4 + 3	= 0 + 7
11	הָסֵר מִעָלַי נִנְעָדָה	11	3	3	3
	מִתְנַגֵּת יָדְךָ אֲנִי כָלִיתִי:		4	4	4
	Total, v. 11		7	= 3 + 4	= 0 + 7
	Numerical Total, v. 8-9		14	= 7 + 7	= 0 + 14
	Strophe 6 Chiasmus Total, v. 10-11		14	= 7 + 7	= 0 + 14
	Total, v. 8-11		28	= 14 + 14	= 0 + 28

12	בתוכחות על-עון יסרת אִישׁ	12	5	5	5
	וְתָמַס כְּעֵשׂ חֲמוּדֵי־		3	3	3
	אֵךְ הֶבֶל כָּל-אָדָם סֵלָה:		4	4	4
	Strophe 7 Total, v. 12		12	= 8 + 4	= 0 + 12
	Canticle II.2 Total, v. 10-12		26	= 15 + 11	= 0 + 26
	Canto II Total, v. 7-12		52	= 29 + 23	= 0 + 52
13	Coda שְׁמַעַתְּ תַּפְלִיתִי יְהוָה	13	3	3	3
	the concluding prayer וְשִׁיעֵתִי הֶאֱזִינָה		2	2	2
	אֶל-דִּמְעָתִי אֶל-תַּחֲרֹשׁ		4	4	4
	כִּי גַר אָנֹכִי עַמּוּדָ־	14	4	4	4
	תּוֹשָׁב כָּכָל-אֲבוֹתִי:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 13		16	= 13 + 3	= 16 + 0
14	הֲשַׁע מִמֶּנִּי וְאִבְלִיגָה	15	3	3	3
	בְּטָרֶם אֵלֶיךָ וְאִיגָנִי:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 14		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0
	Canto III Strophe 8 Total, v. 13-14		22	= 16 + 6	= 22 + 0
	Total, v. 12-14		34	= 24 + 10	= 22 + 12
	Total, v. 2-14		122	= 77 + 45	= 70 + 52
	With the heading and סֵלָה (2x), v. 1-14		128	= 81 + 47	

* A slight emendation of the text in v. 6b is necessary: I read אֵךְ הֶבֶל, or אֵךְ בְּהֶבֶל, instead of אֵךְ כָּל-הֶבֶל (see *BHS*), not only on the basis of the evident dittography and the awkwardness of the MT phrase, but also in light of the two other occurrences of the term אֵךְ הֶבֶל in vs. 7 and 12. Naturally, this emendation will have an effect on the word-count.

Observations

1. The arithmetic centre of the poem on the level of words is constituted by the two words וְעַתָּה מָה, 'And now, what...?', in v. 8a (122 = 60 + 2 + 60). It is unlikely that they were consciously designed as the meaningful centre, seeing the incompleteness of the phrase. The middle verseline, v. 8, would be a most appropriate meaningful centre, because it contains the quintessential idea of the psalm: waiting for YHWH in hope despite adversities and suffering. It clearly harks back to the theme of hope in a distressing situation, so strongly expressed in Ps. 38:16 – see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 38](#).

וְעַתָּה מָה-קְוִיתִי אֲדֹנָי תוֹחֶלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא

And now, YHWH, what do I wait for? My hope is in you!

Significantly, the pivotal verseline is not only flanked by 7 verselines (15 = 7 + 1 + 7) but also made up of 7 words consisting of altogether 26 letters. For a similar situation, see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 40](#).

2. Like Psalm 38, the psalm has a tripartite canto structure: vs. 2-6, 7-12, and 13-14, which is based on rhetorical and logotechnical considerations.¹

Canto I, vs. 2-6 Complaint about the transience of human existence
 Canto II, vs. 7-12 Despite this, my hope is in you, YHWH
 Canto III, vs. 13-14 Conclusion: hear my prayer, God, before I cease to be.

The two hard breaks between vs. 6||7 and 12||13 caused by the refrain-like phrase **אֵדָהּ הַכֹּל כָּל-אָדָם**, 'every mortal being is only a breath of wind', divide the text into three sections: Cantos I, II, and III, which is in MT underscored by the *selahs*.

3. **Canto I** is an unmistakable coherent structural unity as shown by the fact that it contains a strict numerically devised **37**-word passage, vs. 3-6 – see Observation 4.

Canto II is likewise a coherent unity, but divides into 2 Canticles, vs. 7-9 and 10-12. It is made up of exactly **52** words, with **26** in each section, symmetrically arranged in the following way:

v. 7	12 words	}	26 words in total in vs. 7-9 (Canticle II.1)
8-9	14 words		
10-11	14 words	}	26 words in total in vs. 10-12 (Canticle II.2)
v. 12	12 words		

Note the perfect numerical chiasmus, which firmly links the two Canticles:

26 = **12** + **14** in vs. 7-9
26 = **14** + **12** in vs. 10-12.

Canto III (vs. 13-14), the final prayer, is clearly a coda. It is significantly made up of **22** (2 x 11) words – see Observation 5 in my Analysis of [Psalm 38](#).

4. Canto I, vs. 2-6, is significantly made up of **37** words, which represents the numerical value of the keyword **הַכֹּל**, 'vanity', occurring in vs. 6b, 7a and 12b (5 + 2 + 30 = **37**).² See the General Introduction, "The numerical value of a keyword in the text", for more examples of this intriguing device.

The deliberate use of **37** words here vividly brings to mind the structuring role of the number **37** on verse level in the book of Ecclesiastes, which deals explicitly with 'vanities'. The book is made up of **222** (6 x **37**) verses!

5. The name **יהוה** occurs only twice: in vs. 5a and 13a.

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¹ Van der Lugt, who finds a bipartite structure, does not take into account the demarcating function of the refrain in vs. 6 and 12, which is supported by the two *selahs*. This also applies to Fokkelman, who finds a tripartite structure that differs from mine: vs. 2-4, 5-10, and 11-14.

² The number 37 is based on the *decimal value* of the word – see the General Introduction, p. 5.